

I was asked by Necmi to use a work of mine dated in 1979 as a starting off point for this talk. He has his own agenda for this and that is OK. But the request put me in a situation I never had experienced: to unravel a speech solely from a piece of mine. This at first made me fear that I might seem presumptuous, and also, I am afraid that the result will be a big ramble. Still, thinking about all this helped me clarify things for myself in a way the piece itself had not fully done on its own. The piece is a very simple one, one of those where a parent may put down the artist by commenting that his child could do it as well or better.

I won't even bother to show an image. In one of the processes you find a number of little garbage objects around you, maybe in the gallery or on the street. Cigarette butts, wrinkled pieces of paper, bent wire, all will do, just keep a consistent small scale. In a separate process, you write words for titles,--the same number as objects--on little pieces of paper. You favor evocative words like "the trace," "the ladder" or "the betrayal." You try to avoid definitive statements like "the three legged elephant." You then make a pile of objects and a pile of titles. Then, at random, take one of each pile and pair them. Pin them on a wall with straight-pins, as if they were butterflies. Keep enough space between them so that the whole configuration seems to have some levity. Apparently people feel that this way it looks poetic. That's it.

The first time I did it, I was interested in how, in spite of the randomness of the pairings, people would construct their own narrative. I liked to expose the fear of chaos that is natural in people and leads them to introduce their own order. Fear of chaos stimulates creativity.

For this piece I'm primarily indebted to two people, Jorge Luis Borges and René Magritte. Borges once wrote "The Aleph," a story of a dot -- or rather a little two-inch sphere—floating in mid air, but only visible from the 19<sup>th</sup> step going down to the basement of a very mediocre Argentine writer. The little thing has the particularity of having all the images of the Universe coexisting in it simultaneously. The story, written in 1945, somehow prefigured the notion of the original hologram negative invented 15 years later. The original hologram is sort of a photographic negative made by the rays of a laser beam interfering with the scattered light that returns from the photographed object. The recorded information is a seemingly random pattern that reconstructs the image three-dimensionally once it is observed again under a laser beam. One of the particularities of that negative is that any fragment contains the whole information of the image. The possibility that order can become disorder and return to order and that any part, no matter how small, always contains everything is, to put it mildly, quite intriguing. So, my randomly picked pieces of garbage, I modestly feel, share this quality. Since I can give them any title I want, they contain everything. I am aware that this is so mainly because I say so. But somehow this is both a prerogative the artist has, and also a wise exploitation of the viewer's credulity.

Magritte's connection with the piece is more obvious. Magritte always interested me for two reasons. One is that in spite of his stellar place in the history of art, he was not a very good painter. He was, however, a very good artist. The point here is that a good artist doesn't have to paint well, he has to use paint well for his purpose. This may sound like being picky with words, but the explanation for this is

that had he painted better than he did, his works would have been slick calendar stuff. And had he painted worse, he wouldn't have made it into a gallery, at least not during his time. In other words, he used painting just right. He found the perfect and very fragile point in which his imagery could survive the way it should. The packaging of his product is not too good or too bad, it is perfect and beyond evaluation.

The other reason and more important reason for my attraction to Magritte is how he handled nomenclature. Nomenclature as we use it is arbitrary and conventional. We learn the name of things already named in a training process misnamed "education". We never are asked to find unnamed things, or to name or rename things creatively. We may name our children pretty much anything we want, but then we either naturally bend to convention or are told the margins within which we may do it. And then we confine them to the names we give them.

So, nomenclature represents not just an order, but also the power that established that order and that trains us to both live within and to use it. The Venezuelan independence hero Simón Bolívar had a teacher by the name of Simón Rodríguez. Rodríguez, whom I admire greatly as an incredibly lucid thinker and pedagogue and generally consider much more important than Bolívar, was very anti-clerical. He had children and decided to protest against the Church's list of names of saints used to christen children. He registered them as Zanahoria, Zapallo and Choclo instead, which in English would be Carrot, Pumpkin and Corn. We don't know what this did to the children, but in retrospect it sounds like an abuse of power.

Recently, in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Julian Assange, the Wikileaks guy, mentioned the problem of URL nomenclature, the dot com things one uses to contact web pages.<sup>i</sup> The URL system, a form of nomenclature, is controlled by private enterprise. Therefore an enormous amount of names representing or leading to information attached to those names can be administered and erased privately. Probably his most interesting contribution, way beyond Wikileaks' sensational revelations, is his search for a naming system that mathematically couples with any information posted on the Web. Used as a new standard, this would preclude the possibility of disappearance of information, or censorship after the fact.

In a modest way, and fitting his less complex time, Magritte challenged this power of nomenclature. He simply shared that power, which is the feat I like best in him. Words in his work have a magically transformative quality and he tells us that we have permission to use that process. He often happened to do his act with words, but he also upset nomenclature by just using imagery. In either case, he doesn't change or confine reality; he shows us how to open it. Because of this I always felt that he was a conceptualist alternative to Duchamp, and that he didn't really fit on the shelf of Surrealism on which he usually is stored.

This placement of Magritte as an alternative to Duchamp is quite important for me. It points out that his individual paintings are not that relevant. The same can be said about Duchamp's work, which only serves to show how his games are played. In Magritte what I find crucial is his method. I call it the Magritte Method. It allows to scramble different systems of order to find a new one. Surrealism was

really based on individual indulgence, on the amplification of neurosis and on free association. It managed to tap into archetypical fears and conflicts and produced unexpected and interesting images. Surrealist artists were consumers of their own dreams. If this was a method, it was quite a different method to that of Magritte.

In Duchamp's work we have a different case altogether. What matters in his production is the creation of games, rather than how he played them. More than anybody before him, he showed us that artists can be divided into game players and game creators. Raphael, Rembrandt or Velazquez, were all amazing players in a game that already existed, a game that somebody else had invented. Duchamp, instead, was an incredible creator of games. I respect both kinds of artists, but am more drawn to the creation of methods and games. They are better tools for empowering people. I think of my piece as a game more than as a traditional closed object art piece. Obviously it's a game with very simple and nearly stupid rules. But it has a degree of unpredictability, which is important because it keeps it alive.

In art, games that are totally open are as useless as those that are totally regimented. I can create a game where the rules are: 1) Take pencil and paper; 2) Do whatever you want. The result is completely unpredictable, which is not bad. But it is also unpredictable if after you play it you end up with a piece of art, which is less good. On the other extreme, I can create a game with regimented rules: 1) Take this drawing divided into numbered areas; 2) The numbers indicate colors that you should have available; 3) Fill the areas with the corresponding colors. Here the result is totally predictable in its result and it still doesn't ensure that you end up with a piece of art. I used to tell my students to use a political analogy. The first

extreme is libertarianism at its worst. The second extreme is dictatorship at its worst. The truth is in democracy at its best, that is, a body of agreed on laws that ensures a fair distribution of power and the freedom of each citizen without the possibility of doing any harm. It is the most tricky and difficult option both in politics and in art.

But I want to continue with nomenclature. Many years ago, and as an extreme caricature, I hypothesized that back in the Stone Ages somebody made a weird object that amazed everyone into a sense of awe. There was no word for it yet so somebody just called it art, or whatever equivalent there might have been in Neanderthalese. That event constituted a great accomplishment and was memorable. It filled what we now study as the History of Art, it created a great market for galleries, and it fostered the industries of art schools and art residences. The only problem is that from then on, people tried to make things to fit the word art, instead of replicating the conditions for awe they just worked within the word. Since then, in a process of reproductions of reproductions or by using models of models, the whole production of art became a debased, non-awe inspiring echo of that first experience. So, naming is both an act of use of power and an act of restriction.

In an unrelated thought process, but concurrently, I also wondered about the relation there might be between the notions of God and that of art. Both cannot be precisely defined and we resort to describe what they are not rather than what they are. A precise description would be blasphemy in one case and obliteration in the other, or so they believe.

These things came together for me very recently while I was reading a book called *Naming Infinity*. It deals with the history of a group of Russian mathematicians who during the first years of the twentieth century used mathematics as a form of meditation and connected set theory of Georg Cantor with a practice called “name worshipping.” Name worshippers believe that they can reach God by endlessly repeating the word God or the word Christ. The subsequent theological polemic was about the danger of adoring the word instead of adoring God and thus committing heresy. If “the name of God is God” and there are many languages to mention him, there might be some polytheism operating here, since the word—and God—would change accordingly. In any case, it was the mathematician Pavel Florensky who figured that both God and mathematical sets were made real by naming them, and that, as he said, “the set of all sets might be God Himself.”

Although I don’t believe in God, or at least I refrain from taking sides on the issue, I always smelled a faint odor of blasphemy when making art. If there is a god, who am I to invoke omnipotence and try to improve or complete the divine “oeuvre?” And then, we call something art or designate it as such, we adore it via contemplation and we deposit money offerings in its honor.

Lately I am having the hunch that art, at least as we are mostly understanding it today, is a leftover from pre-literate cultures and therefore a rather anachronistic activity. I’m too lazy and ill equipped to prove my point. But all the above, and you can add to my arguments the intersection of aura in art with religious halo, leads me to be very skeptical about how well we are pursuing our

profession. Are we doing things for the present and future or are we just refining the past?

Modernism started a timid shift by introducing analytical tools into the academic art production that was prevalent during the middle of the nineteenth century. Artists took single components of what then was believed to be an integral and synthesizing work of art. They used whatever part they chose as a starting point and then expanded it to take the space of the full piece. This was a good though small step forward to consider ideas as an intrinsic part of art. Until then ideas functioned as a topic for illustration or for function, but remained as something independent.

Implicit in the modernist move was the ability not just “to make” in the sense of manufacturing, but also to make order—to organize in a new order—using guidelines set down by the artist. It took a while more for conceptualist art to arrive and put all this on the table with some clarity. Although it must also be said that this particular contribution has not yet been acknowledged because the formalism of tendencies of the twentieth century obscured it.

Conceptualism not only allowed for the literate mind to develop systems of order in art, but it also helped to clarify that art is about solving problems. It made clear that all art done since that first creation of the word “art” may be observed and criticized from the point of view of problem solving. The questions raised in front of artworks are not anymore about if they make us feel good or disturb us, if we like them or not. The questions now are a little more pointed: Is the artist presenting us

with an interesting problem? Is the artist solving it well, as perfect as possible, in fact? Did the artist expand our knowledge? Can we take it from there?

All these questions were always present, but were hidden in sensorial satisfaction, in misuse of taste and more lately, in desperately trying to conquer the market and thus shifting art from shaping culture into a home industry or more. So, now that these issues are somewhat clearer, we can address empowerment. In conceptualist terms it would be finding the balance between the power of naming and the restrictions given by the name.

During a boring faculty meeting in my university during September of 1970 I had a non-mystical epiphany. I realized that when I made a dot on a piece of paper I was changing the Universe forever. As a matter of fact, I did make that dot right then and there. With it -- an apparently modest act -- I forced any subsequent inventory of the Universe, that is the list of names that composes it, to register my change. It was an enormous assumption of power, one that to my surprise the few colleagues I immediately shared it with failed to recognize. When I told them they only rewarded me with a puzzled look and a mild smile that preceded their turning around and leaving.

What they missed is that I found a crucial crossroad. Confronted with my ability to change the Universe, I now had to decide if I kept this power for my self or if I shared it with everybody. Monopolizing it would define me as a traditional artist. The power would help me to cement my individual reputation and hopefully wrest the market from my colleagues to become richer and more famous than any of them. On the other hand, sharing it would mean to recognize openly that art has an educational function and that it should lead to develop creativity in everybody else. It should assert the intelligence of

others rather than serve to declare one's own. It would mean, as a consequence, that there is no real difference between creating and educating. And it would also mean that I should look at everything in terms of distribution of power and the inequalities that exist in that distribution. Idiot that I am, I chose the second option.

Our relation with the universe probably is much more complex than we might believe. For instance, it's not clear if we found the universe or if the universe found us. The act of nomenclature somehow makes us believe that the power is shifted over to us; we called it Universe after all. We believed that we took possession of it and then started researching and poking into it, which is a form of refining nomenclature and asserting power. When I was eight years old I had decided that the universe was cube. It didn't take me very far. Much later and jokingly I thought of it as a mass of cotton candy. In spite of the humor, this actually was a serious improvement on my cube.

The dot for the inventory, the cube, the cotton candy, all were my way of interfering with a given order or giving one to things that somebody else had appropriated without consulting me. On a selfishly individualist level, they were an expression of my resentment against what I perceived as an abuse of power. A lot of art is produced venting this frustration and that is why art for so many artists is a therapeutic tool. The dot, however, that power to alter the Universe, is something much more important than personal therapy. It provided me, and hopefully others, the parameters for my actions. It gave me the precise distance **from** what **I** am...**to** what **we** can do. In Czech, I discovered a couple of days ago, the parameters are phrased like a pristine set of mathematical parentheses: from in Czech is OD and DO is to. That symmetrical space between OD and

DO is where the artist fits and tries to push the distance further, maintaining the symmetry for clarity and pulling the audience in for help.

A couple of weeks ago I read an article in *The New Yorker* that made me think that without disregarding the above we should go even further. I don't want to suddenly disregard the OD—DO analogy because of its ethical implications. But what I read was about David Deutsch and dealt with quantum computing and its conceptual and practical difficulties. Deutsch is after a universal computer that, following Alan Turing's speculation about "a machine that can compute any computable sequence" including the description of any simulated machine and of itself. Turing's point was made in 1936 and conditioned by technological conditions of his time. Thinking realistically about issues of quantum technology and complexity is something relatively recent.

Deutsch refers to a conversation with his friend Charles Bennett, a physicist with IBM. Complaining about the elusiveness of computational complexity he remarked that there was no standard computer with respect to which you should be calculating the complexity of the task."<sup>ii</sup> The article observes that: "One could find out how complex a task was on a particular computer, but that didn't say how complex a task was *fundamentally*, in reference to the universe. Unless there really was such a thing as a universal computer, there was no way a description of complexity could be fundamental."<sup>iii</sup> Now, all this is quite beyond me, but what intrigued me was Bennett's answer. He said: "Well, the thing is that there is a fundamental computer. The fundamental computer is physics itself." This statement led Deutsch to realize that the physics used until then were the wrong or incomplete physics and he started to rethink Turing's computer in terms of quantum physics.

All this is only relevant here because, at least for me, once again there was an issue of nomenclature in play. I never had thought until that moment about merging the ideas about a universal computer with a field of knowledge. We normally consider physics a non-philosophical area, a container filled with laws, experiments and calculations. Similarly, we deal with art as a container of techniques and the objects they produce. So, physics can be re-considered to be a universal computer, an all-encompassing system that is in tune with the universe while it simultaneously tries to measure it and itself. If that can be done persuasively, why not re-consider art as another universal computer that addresses similar needs through different means?

I honestly don't know how much closer art can bring us to the fundamental truth of the universe. The re-consideration or re-naming, however, will help to get us off our role of manufacturers and help us focus on our duties to question, to speculate and to expand knowledge. It may not help quantify quantum issues, but on the other hand it helps in working out forms of communal relations and expressions that are not covered by physics but that may inform physics. Maybe the ultimate fundamental computer is a combination of art and physics. Who knows? No matter what, all this also warns us that nomenclature is something that shouldn't be taken lightly.

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<sup>i</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, "In Conversation with Julian Assange, Part I," e-flux #25, May 2011. Retrieved May 6, 2011

<sup>ii</sup> Rivka Galchen, "Dream Machine," *The New Yorker*, May 2, 2011, p.36

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.